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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 000207

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [PINR](#) [MARR](#) [NI](#)
SUBJECT: GON Chief of Army: Political Climate Dangerous, Politicians
Putting Stability at Risk

REF: ABUJA 181; CARSON-SANDERS FEB 24 TELECONS

CLASSIFIED BY: SandersRR, Amb, state, EXEC; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1. (S) Summary: Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Dambazau, concerned about the current political environment in Nigeria, told the Ambassador February 24 in a one-on-one session at a safe house in Abuja, that he still considers Goodluck Jonathan the Commander-in-Chief of Nigerian Armed Forces until such time as there is another constitutional action or manifestation that confers that authority back to ailing President Yar'Adua. He said the armed forces were not alerted to the return of the President until his aircraft had taken off already from Saudi Arabia. Up until this point, Dambazau stressed he had not been worried about stability, but admitted that Nigeria had entered a phase where anything can happen. He is committed to watching out for any signs of a coup or any involvements or subliminal efforts by politicians, particularly from the North, to try to encourage such an action. Dambazau said the most important thing to him was for Nigeria to remain stable and that he would not sit back and allow the country to become unstable, noting rule of law needs to prevail. He hoped that the politicians would get their act together and put the country back on track. For him, his hopes rest with the National Assembly right now, notably the Senate, to try to find constitutional and rule of law ways out of the mess. The COAS said that it has been decades since he has seen the country polarized so severely, particularly within the GON Cabinet (FEC), along ethnic and region lines, and that the FEC was bankrupt in its ability to provide any executive direction. The FEC was further divided into two camps, Yar'Adua's and Jonathan's, but strictly for either political or financial gain. In both cases, Yar'Adua and Jonathan had allowed themselves to be "caged off" by people that do not have the best interest of the nation at heart. He concluded that Jonathan has an opportunity, but he is squandering it as he is currying favor to special interest and its beginning to show. Asked what could the USG do to help Nigeria at this delicate time, the COAS said to tell Jonathan to be his own man; stop bowing to former President Obasanjo as that makes everyone nervous; and, standup as

a national leader, not a regional one. Meanwhile an irate Chairman of the Governors' Forum, Kwara Governor Saraki, called the Ambassador midnight Feb 25 to complain fiercely about the USG's February 24 statement on the political environment saying the USG was not giving Nigeria a chance to work through the situation. Also on February 24, the Senate passed the first stages toward a constitutional amendment of sections 145 and 190 requiring Presidents and Governors to transfer to their deputies in writing after 14 days of being out of the country. End Summary.

12. (S) In a late evening February 24 meeting, Ambassador met with Nigerian Chief of Staff of the Army (COAS) Abdulrahman Bello Dambazau at a safe house on the outskirts of Abuja to discuss the current political climate. Datt and RSO accompanied Ambassador but Dambazau wanted only a one-on-one. The COAS made several key points during the two hour session focused on the confusing leadership situation, what he hopes will happen in the next 10-14 days, and the importance of Nigeria remaining stable. Dambazau, who had met with Assistant Secretary Carson on February 8 (ref A), said his views had changed drastically since that time on the fragile political environment. At that time he was not concerned with stability; but, he is now. On the Presidential Guard being called out to escort Yar'Adua from the airport, Dambazau said this was appropriate and standard, as they are responsible for all ceremonial activity concerning the President.

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Who is in Charge: Yar'Adua or Jonathan?

13. (S) In response to the question as to whom the COAS believes is the Commander-in-Chief of Nigerian Armed Forces at this time, Dambazau, a northerner said, Goodluck Jonathan. In the view of the COAS, Jonathan holds that authority until such time as either the National Assembly implements a constitutional action returning authority to Yar'Adua, or there is some other manifestation that shows the President is capable and has resumed his duties. Dambazau said it was unfortunate that the entire Yar'Adua health situation had not been handled well. There were a few people around the ailing President who were manipulating the situation for both power and money, he noted. The COAS highlighted that the "Katsina group" around Yar'Adua has "caged" the President off and even before his departure to Saudi Arabia more and more Yar'Adua was not being seen as a national figure. It is unfortunate that Jonathan is beginning to do the same thing. The people that Jonathan has around him now are behaving just as badly as the Katsina clique, with Jonathan handing out favors to his ethnic group, which the Army Chief said was not/not Ijaw. Dambazau said the Acting/Vice President comes from the smallest ethnic minority in Bayelsa State, and that he is beginning to behave like a "sectional," leader and less like a national figure with national responsibilities. The COAS said he has had several meetings with Jonathan and that he is a "simple man who is easily influenced." He gave the example of the recent transfer of naira 19 billion of GON funds to a Niger Delta environmental project that was done at the end of a meeting that Jonathan had with a group from his region. Dambazau said this was done outside of the normal Cabinet decision-making process based on a meeting he had had with his "kinsmen."

What Can the USG Do to Help?

14. (S) Ambassador asked the Chief of the Army if he had seen the USG statement noting our concern about the uncertain political environment, which she noted was tough and one of our high water marks on the situation. She added that Nigeria cannot afford to fail and that we wanted to ensure right from the beginning that everyone understood this. Dambazau said yes he had seen it, and

thought it was tough, but understood our position. Ambassador explained that she expected a significant amount of blow back from some quarters of government, but it was important to put these markers down now because we want Nigeria to do the right things doing this transition period. Dambazau said that he hoped the USG "would give Nigeria time" to find its footing. He was "counting on the National Assembly, particularly the Senate," to find a way out of the political morass. However, he added, that too may not happen. Ambassador said that the USG would be watching the political situation over the next 10-14 days very closely to see who is doing what and where the center of power ends up. We have strong concerns about the situation being manipulated by a "few people around the President" issuing edicts in the name of the President when he cannot make decisions for himself. How can anyone trust any decision or statement coming out of the Villa, not knowing if it is really from the President or a surrogate with

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malicious intentions? Dambazau agreed. Ambassador also noted her concern about the very carefully worded February 24 press statement from the Villa announcing Yar'Adua's return; not/not referring to Jonathan as Acting President, but as the Vice President; and, stating that Jonathan "would oversee the affairs of state," instead of noting he still retained authority over government until the President's health improved. She also added that Yar'Adua's wife, Turai, was scheduled to have a meeting with Jonathan later the evening of February 24 instead of Jonathan actually seeing the President.

Wither Jonathan?

15. (S) On the Acting/Vice President Jonathan, the COAS said that he was too easily influenced by others and that his biggest Achilles heel and what most northerners were worried about was Jonathan's relationship to former President Obasanjo (OBJ). Dambazau said OBJ is "in and out of Aguda House, Jonathan's residence, several times a day now, and it is making people uncomfortable, particularly in the North." "One thing he must do is show people that he is his own man." It appears to everyone now that whatever Jonathan is saying is being orchestrated directly by Obasanjo. Ambassador revealed that she had a request into see Jonathan for February 26, but given the current political situation it was possible that the meeting would be cancelled. However, if it was not, how useful did Dambazau think it would be to put a marker down with Jonathan on these issues, particularly stepping far away from Obasanjo; showing leadership as a national figure, not a regional one; and, proving he has decision-making independence? The COAS said he believed that these were important messages for the USG to convey, and that we should do so soon. Right now the country needs to not only have faith in its leaders, but also believe that its leaders have the best interest of the nation at heart.

Stability

16. (S) Dambazau highlighted that Nigeria's stability is at risk now, and that this is one thing that senior generals like him could not allow, noting that any military action would only be along the lines of law and order. He added that the politicians really need to find a solution soon. The COAS said that the Nigerian military is not interested in running the country; this is not our role. We have worked hard to professionalize, we are recognized for our peacekeeping efforts around the world, and we believe in democracy and civilian rule. Ambassador asked the COAS if he received an order from the Villa to call out the troops or execute a military

action, how he would respond. Dambazau was clear. "There are only three people that I take orders from, and this is clear in our chain of authority and command," he said. They are: the Minister of Defense, the Chief of Defense Staff, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, who he considers at this time to be Jonathan.

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Comment

17. (S) Clearly the General is worried. This was a more pensive Dambazau then just two weeks ago when USG officials met with him at the CMR (ref A). He, like the USG, is closely watching the political situation. He, also like the USG, hopes that unauthorized and questionable edicts do not start coming from the Villa. The Mission here has no expectation that Yar'Adua will ever physically emerge in public or that he is in charge of his mental faculties. We will also not believe any information coming out of the Villa. Dambazau, although he thinks Jonathan is easily influenced and a "simple man," still believes that he is in a position/position -- regardless of whether he carries the title of acting president or vice president - to help steer the country out of the current mess. However, in order to do that and gain respect, Jonathan must begin to transform himself into a national figure, drop OBJ, and work with the National Assembly, particularly the Senate to find solutions in the best interest of Nigeria. The question is whether Jonathan can and will do this. Ambassador plans to make the "dropping OBJ issue" one of the center pieces of any conversation she is able to have with Jonathan over the next couple of days. She will also raise the importance of the Acting/Vice President to be seen as a national, rather than regional figure. As per options discussed in ref B, Mission looks forward to moving forward on proposed future telecons between Jonathan and current and past USG officials, and possible other high-level visits to continue to put pressure on Nigerian politicians to get their act together; show better leadership; and, do a better job of protecting the interest of the Nigerian people and the nation. What we do not want because of poor leadership is a Niger-like move where a military group walks into the Nigerian Cabinet meeting and takes over.

SANDERS